

Part III

Internet and Culture

Introduction to Part III

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In considering what culture is relative to the Internet, there are two useful if perhaps oppositional touchstones to consider. One is from Matthew Arnold: that culture comprises “the best that has been thought and said in the world” (2003). The second is from Raymond Williams, who in defining culture claimed that it comprised “a whole way of life” in addition to “the special processes of discovery and creative efforts” (Williams & Higgins, 2001, p. 11). There’s a wide gulf separating those two definitions, and many battles have been fought over what should “count” as culture. Yet if we take a dialectic approach and see these two definitions as boundary poles, a place emerges for what culture might mean, and, here, for what it means applied to the Internet.

Arnold’s definition, although considered elitist by some, reminds us that culture is something that we should celebrate, and look to as exemplary work, being inspirational, thought-provoking, and perhaps challenging to more pedestrian thoughts and activities. On the other hand, Williams encompasses a much broader circuit, arguing that we must envision culture as a set of activities, practices, beliefs, and artifacts of a people or society. Williams is more inclusive, discarding value judgments, instead believing that societies become cultures when their beliefs, practices, and ideas evolve and become distinct from those of others.

Both definitions can be useful in thinking through how “culture” intersects with the Internet and activities found online. There are practices, artifacts, and elements we can celebrate, and that can challenge us. And increasingly, we find practices, beliefs, and activities that are distinct from physical counterparts found in daily life. Both systems need to be explored, documented, and theorized. We will see our contributors do just that with particular attention to how diverse components of culture have emerged on the Internet.

Introducing the Chapters

Lori Kendall begins Part III by examining one of the central topics in the field of Internet studies in her chapter, “Community and the Internet.” She explores

scholarly work on the topic, taking us through the rise of the (concept of the) virtual community, debates about whether online communities count (or should count) as real communities, and how identity plays a key role in mediating our experiences with community. In doing so she points to several key advances in this area – the acknowledgment that most communities span online and offline life, and that we are struggling between twin desires to be the central node in a network over which we have control, and to experience genuine ties of sociality with others. Kendall closes by arguing that we need better studies of how such communities fit into the larger life activities of users (over time as well as geography), and what such communities could do to materially improve our daily lives.

Next, Mia Consalvo explores a particular type of space or place on the Internet in Chapter 15, “MOOs to MMOs: The Internet and Virtual Worlds.” Chronicling both the history of virtual worlds and scholarship about them, she points to key areas of research done so far, including discussion of the (often hidden implications of the) spatial aspect of virtual worlds, the role and importance of avatars, as well as how ideas about community and identity are central to what happens in such spaces. She also argues that we need to expand our repertoire as scholars, going beyond studying a few well-known virtual worlds, as well as to begin investigating the business and economics of creating such worlds, which are built in particular cultures and contexts which can and do shape assumptions about their design and use.

The particularities of studying “Internet, Children, and Youth” is tackled in a chapter by Sonia Livingstone. Countering myths that all children are Internet-savvy millennials, prolifically creating and posting media online as well as questioning authority, Livingstone instead asserts that although some children may indeed find the Internet to be a rich and engaging part of their lives, for others “it remains a narrow and relatively unengaging if occasionally useful resource.” In her extensive studies of youth and the Internet, Livingstone paints a more nuanced portrait of youth online, suggesting that while children and young adults do use the Internet for communicating, learning, playing, connecting and so on, we must also consider the contexts that both constrain and enable that use, and continue to be cognizant of the risks as well as benefits that await them online.

In her chapter on “Internet and Games,” T. L. Taylor provides a much-needed overview of the history of games’ relationship with the Internet, taking us back to games played via bulletin board systems as well as early text adventures. Indeed, Taylor demonstrates the centrality of games to the Internet’s developing history, as well as showing how research about online games is central to our understandings of Internet use at large. She touches on familiar themes in games research such as identity and community, yet also points to important work done focusing on the “digital play industry,” and argues following Kendall that we need to continue to study crossovers between online and offline activities, as these mutually construct one another. Finally, she calls for research in this area to expand its reach to the global, as games have players around the world, yet research touches on only a few countries and cultures.

One key area of recent interest in Internet studies has been the rapid rise in popularity of social network sites, which Nancy Baym addresses in her chapter “Social Networks 2.0.” To contextualize this topic, she points out that media hype surrounding the development of “Web 2.0” and social networking fails to recognize that prior to the development of the World Wide Web, “all of the content was generated by the people, for the people.” Thus, we have not so much a new activity, but new attention to that activity, although this time orchestrated by for-profit enterprises such as Facebook. In her exploration of research on social network sites, she finds that much of the work focuses on a few major sites (including Facebook and MySpace), with more work needed studying how users might travel across various networks, and how use occurs beyond such groups as college and high-school students. Finally, she makes a plea for the study of ethics in this space, arguing that the investment of so many individuals’ time and effort in what are privately controlled domains demands more careful accounting and study, as well as critical scrutiny of the corporations that build such sites.

Focusing more specifically on such for-profit organizations, P. David Marshall explores the intersections of media writ large and the Internet in “Newly Mediated Media: Understanding the Changing Internet Landscape of the Media Industries.” To make sense of such a large task, he focuses on five central concerns and research about them: how the Internet is used to *promote* other media forms (such as the foundational campaign surrounding *The Blair Witch Project* film); the extent to which an online source is a *copy or replica* of a traditional media form; how the Internet has changed *income* expectations for media firms and caused them to explore new revenue models; changing forms and the extent of new *alliances* that media firms are engendering due to the Internet; and finally the role of the Internet in *replacing* other forms of media. Marshall concludes by suggesting that while the Internet is indeed changing how traditional media operate, it is also true that “past models are still working – perhaps not as strongly, but still quite well,” and likewise that we still have much to learn about how consumers of traditional media have translated their interests to online possibilities and offerings.

Susanna Paasonen tackles a subject largely overlooked in the field despite its overwhelming global popularity in her chapter, “Online Pornography: Ubiquitous and Effaced.” She argues that “there is little doubt as to the centrality of pornography in terms of Internet history, its technical development, uses, business models, or legislation” yet it remains “one of the more understudied areas of Internet research.” In bringing attention to work that has been done, Paasonen highlights the challenges involved in how to study porn online, including how to define it and access it, as well as how to recognize what the bounds of a research project might be, given how little we know about its actual use and availability. She points to work being done in relation to alternative porn as well as amateur porn online (among other areas), demonstrating the value of the work as well as the potential to learn from areas still mostly unexplored. She concludes that although pornographic content production may not be the most popular example of user-created

content, it must be studied to give us a more representative picture of how the Internet is being used by everyday citizens.

Tackling a somewhat less controversial topic (at least for consumers), Steve Jones explores “Music and the Internet” in the next chapter. As he points out, for most people the obvious connection between music and the Internet is Napster and illegal downloading. Yet there is much more to take into account beyond repercussions for the music industry, particularly how the Internet has changed the role and identities, as well as practices, of musicians themselves as well as music fans. And as Jones concludes, “the debates about music and the Internet are ultimately about commerce and art, and are thus extraordinarily complicated and, perhaps, irresolvable.” While certainly true in relation to music and the Internet, such a statement also is relevant in regards to many other practices we now see online.

In the last chapter of the volume, Marika Lüders explores “Why and How Online Sociability Became Part and Parcel of Teenage Life.” In doing so, she argues that it is now impossible to research the social life of teenagers without studying their activities online. Furthermore, there are important ramifications that such activity can have on their development, both psychologically as well as culturally. She argues, much as Livingstone has in her chapter, that the Internet offers young people increasing opportunities as well as potential dangers to experiment with identity and create and manage social ties, although we do have to look beyond simplistic media panics to understand the actual constraints or problems that teens face online.

Future Questions

Overall, the chapters included here provide excellent insight into emerging as well as more established phenomena resulting from Internet use, as that use impacts culture. The contributors also point to important questions to consider as more research is done, and as we consider how we *want* to see the Internet impacting daily life. One central question concerns who controls these activities, as well as shapes how we participate in them. As we develop more broadly in our Introduction, little in the way of critical study of the ownership and business practices surrounding Internet-related activities has been done, and we need more detailed study of how individual companies, sites such as Silicon Valley, and cultural factors shape and constrain what is built, and what is not built. Likewise, we need to consider how individuals are faring through the entire life course, now that it is being lived more and more online. How are the rhythms of daily life as well as generational changes impacting people’s activities online? How do people move around and through diverse social network sites, virtual worlds, games, religious sites, and perhaps even porn sites? We have some very good studies of individual aspects of use, but little that can tell us about how people actually use the Internet – not as discrete bounded spaces but as overlapping, contradictory, simple-to-complex places for meaning making. Finally, how are the methods we

use adapting to acknowledge the complexity, diversity, and scope of online activity? There are text, sound, images, video, and interactivity to explore, on devices that include desktops, laptops, netbooks, mobile phones, and other emerging technologies. We are not place-bound as we use the Internet, nor do we often do only one thing at a time. How can we best study all of that activity, particularly as it is embedded in everyday life? These are only a few questions to ponder, as we consider the future of Internet studies.

References

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- Williams, R., & Higgins, J. (2001). *The Raymond Williams Reader*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.